

# **The Fiesta: a Caribbean and Latin American tradition**

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The celebrations of the Day of the Dead in Mexico, Carnival in Rio, Oruro and Trinidad, San Juan in Venezuela, Christmas anywhere – each with their own style and identity – are some of the major festivities in the Americas.

The Fiesta in Latin America is an institution. For Xavier Albó, a Bolivian culture researcher, the fiesta is a fundamental time in the lives of individuals and communities due to their diversity, the richness in its symbols, the amounts of people they attract and the power of their climax.

In the Spanish-speaking Americas, the tradition of the fiesta that goes back to colonial times, is still celebrated on particular dates in the calendar, normally associated to religious festivities and anchored to particular places in the landscape. Local pre-Hispanic rituals and communal celebrations, met by colonial authorities who deemed any aspect of religiosity related to pre-Christian practices inappropriate or even ‘Satanic’, were banned through a process imported from Spain called Extirpation of Idolatries,

in the sixteenth century. Indigenous people, and the slaves that were brought in from Africa to work in the mines and plantations, who also had their own ceremonial and festive culture, all had to find ways to camouflage their ancient traditions under the guise of Christian festivities for the survival of their cultures. In this process, many of the original practices were deeply transformed, some still adhering to the basic principles from ancient times, other changing their form and content quite profoundly. The results of these transformations can be seen in the many fiestas still practiced and celebrated today around the Americas as a whole.

Carnival is a great example of how pre-Hispanic and African practices were adopted to fit in with the ways of the colonial context of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and then to cope with a new Republican identity after the wars of independence of the nineteenth century. Carnival is one of the richest fiestas,

in terms of symbolic value and popularity, allowing for a great mix of social groups to take part and share for in the activities of dancing, dressing up, eating, drinking, flirting and lifting some of the conventions for a few precious days, before the abstinence and frugality of Lent sets onto many sectors of Latin America and the Caribbean’s largely Christian population.

In the Andes, Carnival coincides with agricultural rites performed at the time of the flowering of the potatoes, the staple food of the region. These ancient rites, still celebrated today in more rural localities, called Anata, started

from November to around March, celebrating the rainy season, which was a period dedicated to the cult of the dead. It was thought that the dead helped push the flowers and the potatoes out of the ground, making it ripe for the consumption of the living (Harris and Bouyssee-Cassagne 1987).

Nowadays, the start of Carnival preparations is marked by the Day of the Dead (Todosantos on Nov 1st) and its climax on Carnival weekend, coincides with the end of the period previously celebrated by pre-Hispanic cultures as the end of the time of the dead. During this period, according to ancient rites, a special kind of music had to be played and danced to, which was there to please the dead and accompany their agricultural 'work'. Today, Carnival is still celebrated as a danced pilgrimage, both in urban and rural areas, when a special type of music is played, no longer played on wooden windpipes but the more powerful brass bands, which have the perfect volume needed for outdoors playing.

Oruro, in the Bolivian highlands, is said to be the only religious Carnival in the world. People prepare for many months ahead to take part: to learn and practice the choreographies, to make their costume and to save enough money to finance all their expenses, which many see as an offering to the Virgin. Its centrepiece is a danced costumed pilgrimage that takes place over Carnival weekend, led by the Devil dance, along a three kilometre long route that goes from one historical place of the city to another: from the *Ranchería*, the site of the old Republic of Indians where only indigenous people lived and were separated from the Spanish and creole population at the time when Oruro was a mining settlement in the sixteenth century,

to the image of the Virgin of the Candlemass inside Church of the Mineshaft, a Catholic church built in the XX century over an ancient mine and an old sacred shrine dedicated to the deities of the underground, Wari, Supay and the Tio de la Mina.

Over that weekend, Oruro is transformed from its quiet everyday to a real 'carnavalesque' terrain (Bahktin 1984).

Food and beer stalls prop up everywhere, and they are in business as soon as the tables and chairs are out. The smell of foods: pork crackling (*chicharrón*), roast cow's or sheep's head (*rosto asado*, a real Carnival delicacy), as well as the usual spicy stews and casseroles of Bolivian cuisine (*Ají de gallina*, *sajta de pollo*, and more) are in demand, sometimes eaten out of plastic bags for the sake of convenience. The music of the brass bands, non-stop from Saturday morning to Monday afternoon, invades all the homes and private spaces, as well as the public spaces, making it impossible to concentrate on anything else.

The city is invaded by visitors and costumed dancers, who seem to be able to dance and walk around effortlessly wearing their huge Devil or Moreno masks or their unbelievable high heels, whilst drunk and tired after four days of pretty much continuous partying in devotion to the Virgin (or the *mamita*). The streets are taken not only by the police, to guard public safety, but also by armies of water gun holders, who spray anything that moves, particularly young girls, reminding us of the fertility rites and games of the *Anata*.

At night, all the brass bands, the dancer and many visitors, join in outside of the Temple of the Mineshaft, in night serenades under the stars or sometimes under the summer rain, playing all the music at once to the crowd, and making the fiesta a real mix for the senses.

Other important Carnival fiestas in the region, Rio, Trinidad, Barranquilla, share many of these characteristics, as well as the fact that they are sometimes one in few opportunities when usually underrepresented social groups become visible and join in the celebration of their cities: i.e. the black people of lower resources of Rio and Barranquilla, the urban Indians of Oruro.

Although more and more fiestas that were once considered local and bound to particular communities (i.e. miners in Oruro, black favela dwellers in Rio), are adopted in nationalist discourses that grant them a folkloric status, making them highly desirable photo opportunities for politicians and the elite. As a result, commercialisation ensues and participation becomes

narrowed to a selected few, with enough money or social connections to be accepted as representatives of a spectacle of national identity (see Sheriff 1999 on Rio, Araoz 2003 on Oruro, for examples of this phenomena).

Fiestas respond to how societies are organised, not just at national or regional levels, but also at community or locality level. Social hierarchy determines who runs and sponsors the fiesta, be it the

traditional and honourable figure of the mayordomo in Mexico, who sponsors some aspects of the fiesta for a one year cycle and is in charge of finding his/her suitor for the next year, applying principles of cyclicity and reciprocity – or be it the National Beer Company (CNB) in Oruro, who sponsor the Carnival parade year after year, determining what drink is sold in the streets for the duration of the event.

The form and content of the fiesta tradition has travelled through time and space, as Latin Americans and Caribbean people migrate and their historical contexts continuously develop. Globalisation has reached popular culture as it has reached every other aspect of our lives, making it possible to find global elements familiar to us all in the most traditional fiesta celebration: youth culture, the commodification of the local, the cult of beauty and the body, the impact of tourism, etc.

Traditional fiestas continue to be, as opposed to urban modern fiestas, mostly ritual and social environments, where a community may share in the celebrations around a particular festive date in the calendar, but also they are spaces made visible through dance, music and performance where peoples can enter a dialogue with their own past and present, and maybe even debate around their own identity, and place in the world.